



January 2016

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Recommended Citation

(2016) "Ashes two ashes," *SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute*: , 6-7.

Available at: <https://repository.vtc.edu.hk/ive-de-signed/vol13/iss13/6>

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Ashes two ashes

Jonathan Wut and Pollie Tong make up Hong Kong's award-winning musical duo Lil' Ashes. The HKDI alumni tell us about their struggles and the changes in the modern music industry

Charming acoustic duos come by the dozens in Hong Kong. We're proud of our twee-pop or folksy guitar-based couplings when it comes to the music on offer in the city. However, few come quite as charming as Lil' Ashes. Born and raised in Hong Kong, Jonathan Wut and Pollie Tong met in 2011 while studying for a three-year diploma in digital music and media at the Hong Kong Design Institute. They clicked. They formed a duo.

The HKDI course provided Lil' Ashes with the technical knowledge they needed to compose, arrange and record their own songs. "We learned everything from performing and composing to sound engineering," says Tong. The diploma also required them to focus on drawing, to help keep the creativity flowing. "When I struggle to come up with a song," adds Tong, "I do turn back to drawing. It helps visualise what's in your head."

Wut and Tong honed their musical art as a duo while on the HKDI course. And it wasn't long before they were signed to the prestigious Sony Music record label in 2013, before they had even graduated. "It felt more like a summer project at first," says Tong. "It wasn't until a year later that we realised this was our real career. We were actually in the music business."

Citing influences from the likes of British indie-folk band Daughter and Spanish indie darling Russian Red, Lil' Ashes started by covering some of their favourite tracks in a raw acoustic style before creating their own compositions. "Compared to the music that came out three or four years ago, we sound very different to the norm," says Tong. "But if you listen to current local acts, there are more and more new styles emerging. Our songs are mainly acoustic but a lot goes into acoustic music, like vocal layers, drums and little things that enhance the music."

"There's been a huge change in Hong Kong's music scene," says Wut. "I think people's interests in music are changing and they're turning towards more indie acoustic flavours. People are basically more open to different genres now than simply Cantopop."

The internet and social media have played a large part in the success of acts like Lil' Ashes. These media are seen as the 'future' for many aspiring artists. "If you have something that's good, you will get the attention," says Tong. "Uploading to YouTube or social media is actually more straightforward than going to the record company and sending in a demo."

"There's been a huge change in Hong Kong's music scene"

Jonathan Wut



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Pollie Tong



But fame has not always been a smooth ride for Lil' Ashes. The pair have faced criticisms about their image, their choice of song language and even their weight. "People have criticised us for not singing more Cantonese songs," says Tong. "And they've asked why our band name is so strange. Little things like that. We always try to take these points as constructive criticism."

Lil' Ashes' first album, *Be Little*, was released in 2014 and contains a mixture of Cantonese and English tracks. "When we first started out covering and writing music, it was always in English," says Tong. "At the time most Hong Kong songs weren't really our cup of tea. We barely sang and covered Chinese songs. But, over the past few years, we've been going back to older Chinese songs."

Since 2014, the pair have gone on to win multiple music awards including garnering prizes for both newcomers and groups. "It was after the release of our album that we really felt the pressure," says Tong. "After winning awards and getting good reviews, we felt a bit lost. We weren't sure where to go from there, musically. But that pressure inspired a lot of new songs."

With new songs and a new album due for release later this year, Tong explains that we can expect a more mature sound from Lil' Ashes. "The album is all about life," she says. "We have grown up a bit and gone through new experiences. When there's stress, you most likely want to avoid it and hide from your problems. The upcoming songs relate to that."

Despite their significant height differences – Wut is 182cm while Tong is a much shorter 150cm – Lil' Ashes really do fit together like a glove in a charming indie kind of way. They have appeared on a whole host of stages at gigs and festivals, and have earned a devoted following in Hong Kong and beyond. And, all this, after chancing upon each other at the HKDI.